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Espionage Arrests

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DAN RATHER: What started with an espionage arrest of a retired U.S. Navy officer tonight took a more ominous turn: the arrest of the man's active-duty son aboard a U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier. The son allegedly found with a hidden box of classified documents next to his bunk.

Sources tell CBS News Pentagon correspondent David Martin it appears to be a father-son spy ring for the Soviets and a serious setback to U.S. Navy secrets.

5 DAVID MARTIN: A 22-year-old sailor aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz is under arrest and charged with espionage tonight as part of an alleged family spy ring which Navy officers tell CBS News probably resulted in the worst compromise of U.S. Navy secrets ever.

The alleged head of the ring is this man, John Anthony Walker, a retired Warrant Officer who reportedly boasted that he had every security clearance known to man.

When Walker was arrested and charged with espionage on Monday, a U.S. attorney said there is evidence he has been passing secrets to the Soviets for up to 18 years. Navy officers say Walker's alleged espionage appears particularly serious because he was a communications expert who served aboard two nuclear missile submarines during the mid-1960s and later at Atlantic Fleet Headquarters as a communications watch officer for the entire Atlantic submarine force. In the mid-1970s he held a similar job for communications with all

surface ships in the Atlantic.

Navy officers say that in those jobs Walker would have been access to communications codes and operating orders for Navy submarines and warships, as well as the emergency procedures for launching nuclear missiles.

He was arrested after FBI agents saw him allegedly leave a shopping bag full of classified Navy documents at this drop site in Maryland. Some of the documents apparently came from the Nimitz, where his son Michael works as a clerk in the ship's Operations Department.

The senior Walker also has a step-brother, Gary, who works on minesweeping helicopters like these as an electronics technician. Gary's mother is quoted as saying he was picked up for questioning by FBI agents who asked him to take a lie detector test. The FBI says Gary has not been arrested.

The alleged spy ring apparently began and ended as a family affair. A source close to the investigation told CBS News Walker's wife and daughter turned him in to the FBI.

RATHER: What good would Walker's information have done the Soviets, David?

MARTIN: Dan, the Soviets have a very limited ability to track the movements of our submarines. And the Navy goes to very great lengths to keep it that way. So if Walker was indeed passing copies of operations orders to the Soviets, he was enabling them to track our submarines with a precision they could never do on their own.

The good news is that operations orders and the codes that go with them change on a daily basis. So that whatever damage was done back in the 1960s and '70s is largely over and done with.

RATHER: Thank you very much, David Martin at the Pentagon.